



# Boy Overboard

## Morris Gleitzman

### Overview of the novel

“Overboard,’ says Yusuf’s grandfather, ‘is an English word meaning to do something that is bold, wild, dangerous and crazy.’” Jamal’s decision to ‘go overboard’ stems from his experiences growing up in a war-torn land. He wants to change the world, his world anyway, and he has a grand plan. His passion for soccer will be the means to turn around his government, his country, and life for his family. But Jamal is about to embark upon an adventure more ‘bold, wild, dangerous and crazy’ than he could ever imagine. In reality, it is far from an ‘adventure’. A young boy facing the unknown and dealing with incredible adversity does give the story an edge of excitement and suspense as a true adventure would. But for Jamal and his family who are thrust into a terrible situation, there is no such thing as real choice. In terms of power and control, they have none – over the battered vessels that take them to sea nor the cruel smugglers who treat them appallingly. They risk everything and have given up everything – for what? There’s no guarantee of safe delivery. No knowledge of their fate. Just a hope that an unknown country – Australia – will be a haven.

Separated from their parents at the docks, Jamal and Bibi do not even know if they will see their Mum and Dad again – a haunting nightmare as they try to cope with the hazards and traumas of life on a refugee boat. What they do have control over is attitude and spirit. Jamal’s narration of the tale highlights his incredible strength – be it drawn from his knowledge of his ancestors or his belief in the ‘secret of soccer’ – ‘Never give up, even when things are looking hopeless’. Optimism, perseverance, courage and tenacity are the tools of survival for Jamal, his feisty younger sister Bibi and the friends they make on their journey, Rashida and Omar. These things, together with a rich fantasy life focussed on soccer and how great Australia is going to be, sustain Jamal through horrendous and heart-breaking experiences.

One question Morris Gleitzman leaves unanswered is whether Jamal’s faith and hope will be rewarded. After all Jamal and his family go through, will they be recognised and welcomed? Just how ‘overboard’ does a boy have to go?

### Using this book in the classroom

Read any chapter. Open any page. The novel is extremely rich and thought-provoking with an abundance of stimulating material for discussion and classroom activities. The characters and their experiences provide a realistic reflection of one particular problem that is a major focus in our world today. In the debate about immigration there are many perspectives to consider – those of the refugees, the countries from which people are fleeing, and the communities to which asylum seekers turn.

While this story provides an excellent opportunity to analyse these issues, the depth to which you can do so and explore them further will depend on the level and skill of your students. The appropriateness of tackling the discussion questions and tasks suggested below will need to be judged with your students’ individual situations in mind.

## **1. Themes to explore**

There are many significant themes running through the story. Encourage students to identify recurring themes, finding and synthesising collected examples from the text. Select pertinent quotes to flesh out the themes and generate discussion about Morris Gleitzman's writing. Examples of relevant quotes and sub-themes to explore accompany the small selection of themes listed below. Use as starting points or build further.

### **Conflict**

'Our people are not liked by many of the other people in this country. This has been going on for hundreds of years... The problems of our people are very serious. They started long before this government.' (p42)

*Consider different conflict raised in Boy Overboard:*

- Between people in general – closer to home, situations with family and friends
- Political and social conflict – inhabitants of countries/land and governing bodies, factions and interest groups within governments and/or communities
- The history of conflict in Afghanistan – internal issues over time as well as contemporary problems

### **Survival**

'For the millionth time since we set sail, I remind myself why we're doing this. Freezing on a hard deck all night. Roasting all day. Watching poor little children and old people suffer even more than us. Australia. Laughing people. A kind government. Mum and Dad and Dubbo Abattoirs United.' (p130)

- What keeps people going – in this situation and in others?
- What effect does stress have on people and how do different personalities cope?
- What aspects do we have control over and how can we best use these?

### **Bonds of family**

'I remember what Mum told me about her ancestors. Fierce brave desert warriors, tall and proud in the saddles of their mighty Arab steeds. She also told me about Dad's ancestors, honest hard-working bakers, baking bread so that those fierce warriors had something to mop up their gravy.' (p12)

- Importance of ancestry – knowing who and where you've come from, sense of family history and a place to belong
- Relationships in this story – between Bibi and Jamal, Mum and Dad, parents and children; how friendships are forged in times of adversity
- Putting your needs last and others first

### **Different 'worlds' and cultures**

'Nine-year-old kids shouldn't hate their country. They should love their country and want it to do well in the World Cup and earn the respect of other nations so they'll stop bombing us.' (p23)

- Clashes between what you want to believe, should believe and have to believe
- Notions of freedom and independence
- Things which influence and underpin cultural beliefs and expressions

## Power and powerlessness

'If a person gets really good at soccer, so good that he inspires the government to start a national team and do really well in the World Cup, do you think the government would stop being cross with that person's parents even if that person's parents had been running an illegal school?' (p40)

- Ways of using influence for good and for bad
- Emotions engendered by having or lacking power
- Power within (attitude), living with rules or conditions imposed by others

## 2.Character Analysis

The characters in *Boy Overboard* are strong, multi-dimensional and entirely believable. The major players, Jamal and Bibi, their parents and their new friends Rashida and Omar all exhibit strengths and weaknesses that drive and add to the action. Together with Andrew (a member of the Australian Defence Force who embodies all that is positive and endearing about 'Australians'), they comprise the 'goodies' in a story where 'baddies' are distinctly marked by their abhorrent behaviour. The people-smugglers and pirates, and the hapless sailors, personify evil with their complete disrespect for the value of human life and their callous indifference to the plight of the refugees.

Morris Gleitzman has created characters that lend themselves to analysis. Central players each have gifts as well as flaws. While most people demonstrate different sides to their personalities, a few characters exhibit only the worst of human frailties.

Encourage students to look beyond the actions and words of the characters and probe into motives and psychology – why do people do the things they do?

a) Identify characters in categories of Good and Bad (or other designated headings)

- How do we determine who goes where?
- Find examples of action, words or behaviour that support the selection criteria.

b) Select four different characters from the story and analyse the choices they make.

- What is the choice made up of? (ie: options, lesser of two evils, pros and cons)
- What do they choose to do and why?
- How does this decision impact upon the individual and those around him/her?

c) List each of the main characters and answer the following questions:

- What is important to this character?
- Do you have anything in common with him/her?
- How would you describe his/her temperament?
- What coping strategies does this character employ and do they work?
- Reflect on this character's actions in the story. Write about how you feel towards him/her and why you think this character elicits such a response.

d) Consider the relationships between characters. On the refugee boat, the characters are quite literally thrown together. Each person impacts upon others and brings something unique and of value. Evaluate Jamal, Bibi, Rashida, Omar and Andrew in terms of what each has to offer.

- What ability, talent or skill can each make use of?
- Find examples of these things and how they were used to influence or change a situation for others.

e) Write down three words that spring to mind when asked to describe qualities the following characters have:

Jamal  
Mum  
Dad  
Omar

### **3. Notes on the novel's structure, style and symbol**

Morris Gleitzman brings his novel to life using a range of techniques and interesting story elements. You may wish to explore aspects of his writing style by discussing the notes below. His novel is also an excellent model for students' own writing. Use it to develop their repertoires of techniques, experimenting with the elements Morris Gleitzman uses to such great effect.

**Structure:** A chronological sequence of events narrated by the central character as they unfold

The pace is fast and the story is completely 'gripping' in the sense that the action is continuous – and continually disastrous. Just when it seems things cannot get worse, they do. Each chapter introduces fresh challenge or potential catastrophe so that the reader is swept along with the action and suspense.

- How did you feel while you were reading this story?
- How does Morris Gleitzman retain the interest of the reader?

**Style:** Narrative, told in first person

- What difference does the perspective from which the story is told make?
- What if Bibi had told the story, or an adult? In your opinion, would it work?

#### **Humour**

- How does Morris Gleitzman make use of comedy in a situation that is so grave and serious?
- Do you like the humour in the story? What effect do you think it has?

#### **Symbol**

Sport, particularly soccer, plays a key role in this story. Jamal's fantasies about playing soccer give him all sorts of positive feelings – hope, optimism, ambition, enjoyment.

- What does he have, in fact, to support his love of soccer? No equipment, no playing fields, not many fully able players and a government that doesn't allow the sport in the first place!
- Contrast that with Jamal's sense of the power of sport – bringing people together, fame and celebrity that equates with success and freedom.
- Explore the symbolism of the soccer ball in *Boy Overboard*.
- What power does it have? (eg: helping to forget problems, team building – inclusive, in reality saves as well as endangers them often)
- Why are sporting heroes/identities so important?
- Why are the children deprived of sport?
- What does Jamal get out of his love for soccer?
- Follow the life of the soccer ball – where does it go? What problems does it cause? What is significant about the fact that it completes the journey with Jamal? Who does it bring into Jamal's life?

While this strong symbolism of sport will make the story especially appealing to boys, Bibi ensures that girls are not left out! Her passion for the sport is matched by her amazing skill – amazing considering playing soccer can be a life-threatening crime in her country! Bibi is a very strong female character – almost too willing to stand up to challenge. She vents frustration readily to the point of exhibiting much greater aggression than most of the other characters. Morris Gleitzman has ensured the appeal of this story to a broad audience by creating characters and symbols to which both sexes will be drawn.

#### **4. Issues for exploration – using and going beyond the text**

##### **Emotion**

Every page in this story yields evidence of emotion. The characters experience deep, strong feelings and are often involved in situations that take them to the extremes of very powerful emotion. Grief, despair, anxiety, joy, depression, frustration – all are intensely felt at one point or another. Simply tracing the experiences of one chosen character and listing the emotions he or she reveals is a very worthwhile activity. By skimming over the story to do this, significant issues are brought to light and these will generate much discussion and reflection. Find examples and draw on dialogue from the text to illustrate emotion – for example on page 172: 'I can't move. I'm paralysed with relief and joy.' Jamal's emotions are thrown into chaos as he comes to terms with the reality that his parents are alive having mourned them as dead the last 24 hours! Ask your students to put themselves in the place or the shoes of one of the characters. Utilise dramatic techniques such as role-play, interview, speech and soliloquy to realise and delve into these emotional depths.

##### **Responsibility**

Who takes responsibility in *Boy Overboard* for the situation the characters find themselves in? How does the weight of responsibility affect Jamal and his parents? Whose responsibility *are* the problems – in their home country of Afghanistan, at sea in the hands of smugglers and in a new country reluctant to take them in? Are the adults behaving responsibly? Are the children? Is the responsibility shared or does it fall to one person/one group/one section of society/ one government?

##### **Challenge**

What challenges are faced by each individual – from farewelling their homeland to the shores of a new land? And what of the wider circle of people affected by the lives of the central characters – family, new friends, other refugees on board the boat, countrymen and women left behind, people in a new country and community? Focus on the challenges faced by refugees such as Jamal and his family when they do make it ashore. If Australia takes them in, what will happen to them? What further challenges must be faced before the freedom and happiness they long for might be achieved?

##### **Connections**

Focus on the candlestick that is so treasured by Jamal's family. Explore why it is meaningful and symbolic for them. Discuss the connections people feel with their ancestors, feelings of having a place, belonging somewhere or to someone. Ask the students to consider the judgements and assumptions others make about things that are meaningful to them. Share thoughts about the different cultural values, heritage, symbols and rituals that bring meaning to peoples' lives.

##### **Contrasts**

There is evidence of all of these things – cruelty and violence but also hope and optimism; injustice and abuse but also kindness and fairplay; frustration and suspicion but also trust and personal growth. For many of the negatives, a positive can be found to strike some sort of balance. The perception of 'balance' in one person's eyes, may not equate to evenness to another – it is all relative, especially to the characters experiencing life as they do in this story. Explore these contrasts. Is it possible to work out whose side different characters are on? Against such a rugged background, Jamal's philosophy about what is important in life is starkly simple.

##### **The Role of Girls and Women**

'Bibi must have forgotten that girls aren't allowed to leave the house without a parent. She must have forgotten that females have to keep their faces covered at all times out of doors. And it must have slipped her mind that girls playing soccer is completely, totally and absolutely against the law.'  
(p4)

This is a major issue that is highlighted in the story many times by the dangers and injustices faced by female characters. Finding and discussing examples of these will generate much discussion. Again, the level and situation of students will need to be factored in when utilising the opportunity to investigate a contentious topic.

In *Boy Overboard* the pervasive role of the government not just in politics but also in dictating terms for everyday life is made clear. The degree to which the government of Jamal's homeland, Afghanistan, and the government of his desired new homeland, Australia, encroaches on its people is interesting to think about. For girls and women in particular, what they are prohibited from doing and encouraged to do reflects the expectations and assumptions about their rights and social purpose. Finding out more through wider reading and research will enable views to be shared and discussed with greater understanding.

*'Girls playing soccer is a big crime . . . almost as big as Mum and Dad running an illegal school at home. If the government finds that out, Mum and Dad are in serious trouble.'* (p9)

### **Human Rights**

The rights of all people are called into question by the experiences of refugees on this boat trip. What happens to them? How are they treated? Is this fair or unfair? Who has rights and who does not? Is it always possible to determine what is black and what is white about an issue? What are the complexities that create shades of grey? What of the Rights of Children in particular? Research further by looking at the UN Convention's November 1989 *Rights of the Child*, then consider the treatment of Jamal, Bibi, Omar and Rashida in light of your discoveries.

## **5. Writing activities**

### **Genre**

- Focus on *Boy Overboard* as an example of a novel in a 'realistic, contemporary' genre. Have you read any other stories like this in the sense of being so topical? Does it make a difference that the story is so 'real' and you are also seeing things on TV and reading about it in the news?
- Look within this story to identify elements of other genres such as tragedy or comedy. Write examples and explain how Morris Gleitzman's writing fits into these categories.

### **Articles**

- Write in an analytical or expository style as an investigative journalist or contributing columnist. Find examples in current publications and write your own articles revolving around issues from this story. *Boy Overboard* lends itself particularly well to argumentative writing. Encourage students to research and discuss, to find out about different perspectives and to gather evidence to support any contentions from a wide range of resources. Share students' writings to promote discussion and enable them to engage in active but informed criticism of today's world.

### **Use the final chapter as a stimulus for writing**

*'The Australian Government has changed its refugee policy ... they've revised the procedures and protocols. There was an election in Australia. The Australian Government thought they'd get more votes by keeping you out. And they did.'* (p175)

*'... some people in Australia don't want us.'* (p.176)

*'But I don't understand. Here's a man who's as kind as can be, from a country where people's hearts are bigger than warm loaves, and yet some people there don't want us.'* (p.176)

- How do your students feel as individuals, as part of a community, as part of a nation when they realise the meaning of the book's conclusion?

### **Journal**

- Compose excerpts from the travels of Jamal or any of his fellow passengers.
- Create a diary detailing part of Jamal's parents' journey. Was it similar or in stark contrast?
- Write about the sinking of the ship or the rescue or other major turning point.

### **Review**

- Write a review of *Boy Overboard*. Give your response and your opinion about Morris Gleitzman's work in creating this novel. Make a recommendation as to the age or type of reader who you think would enjoy the book.

### **Personal, creative, imaginative**

- What does this story prompt you to write about? Are there experiences, feelings, discoveries and emotions stirred up by what you have read? Are these positive or negative? Draw on them and allow yourself to write freely in response to or as a result of following Jamal's journey.

### **From writing and discussion to Drama**

- Use role-play and improvisation to get into the minds of characters in this story. Who was on the boat? What interactions and dialogue took place in situations of high tension? What thoughts and feelings were expressed or repressed?
- Play the 'What if...?' game. Outline situations that occurred in the story (prior to or after reading chapters) and ask students to consider alternatives. What happened? What could have happened? What would have changed things? Act out your ideas.
- Use the students' writing as a springboard to plan 'interviews' (on TV, radio, news bulletins etc). Role-play using one or more characters (both 'good' and 'bad') who have an opportunity to air their concerns or talk about their experiences.

### **6. Further exploration**

- Our world today – issues in *Boy Overboard* that are a focus in our media. How are they presented, discussed, debated and in what ways?
- Immigration experiences. Monuments and Museums focusing on Immigration.
- History of Afghanistan – past to current conflicts.
- History of Australia in relation to immigration – past policies to the present debate over refugees.
- Generalisations – collate the references Jamal makes to the qualities and 'character' of Australia and Australians. What image does he get? How? What is your reaction to that?

### **7. Using Technology**

#### **Investigate with the Internet**

- This is an excellent tool for conducting research – guided by the teacher or working independently. Direct your students to appropriate sites with a set task or allow them to pursue areas or topics of interest sparked by this novel. Find out more about the issues raised in *Boy Overboard* using the Internet to provide background to the story. Locate and write about related sites to share knowledge and build an information bank for other class members to draw upon.
- Enjoy looking through Morris Gleitzman's own website ([www.morrisgleitzman.com](http://www.morrisgleitzman.com))
- Use the Penguin website to find out about this author or other stories on related themes

**www.penguin.com.au**